

Between exploitation and control – Clients' conceptions of the consultant-client relationship

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Abstract

During the past years, the use of management consultants has increased significantly, giving managers repeated experiences of both hiring and working with them. In an effort to understand the managers' use of management consultants, this paper sets out to investigate managers' conceptions of management consultants, as they are assumed to influence how consultants are used and managed. Based on the study of ten managers, four conceptions of management consultants, their roles and how they should be managed were identified, representing four different kinds of buyers of consulting services – the disappointed buyer, the trustful buyer, the strong buyer and the instrumental buyer. These conceptions and their relations to the three types of buyers found in the literature are described, showing that the instrumental buyer is a “new” type with no equivalent in the literature. The paper ends with a discussion of possible explanations for the distribution of the conceptions over the ten studied managers, where seven of them could be categorized as strong or instrumental buyers, and what implications this may have on how management consultants are used.

Introduction

Management consultants have in the past years become a rather common phenomenon in managers' lives. Most managers on higher organizational levels have repeated experiences of both hiring and working with management consultants.

In parallel with this increasing use of consultants, there has, however, also been an increasing critique concerning the often rather limited results and effects of consulting engagements. Not only may many of the promised results in consulting projects never materialize (de Caluwé & Stoppelenburg, 2003), but the work of consultants may also have detrimental effects for organizations as reported by e.g. O'Shea and Madigan (1997)

Against this background, many large organizations, being heavy users of consulting services, have become increasingly concerned with their purchase and use of consultants. While remedies have to a large extent focused on systemic changes, i.e. limiting the number of suppliers managers can choose from, introducing formal processes for purchasing consultants,

etc (Werr & Perner, 2005) it may be argued that an additional, often neglected factor strongly influencing managers' use of consultants is managers' understanding of management consultants in general, what they can and cannot do, what are legitimate uses of them, how to manage them, etc.

In line with an interpretive view of knowledge (Sandberg, 2000) we view these understandings of managers as a central aspect of their competence in using management consultants. Managers' perceptions of the relationship between their role as buyers and the role of consultants as providers of management consulting services is assumed to form not only when and how consultants are used but also in what way they are managed and how the consultant-client relationship is formed and evolves.

The nature of the consultant-client relationship is an important aspect of the consulting process as it is in this that the results of the process are formed. It is generally in interaction between consultant and client that new organizations and procedures are designed, new values or IT systems implemented, etc. A trustful and close relationship is often identified as a success factor in the more normatively oriented literature (see e.g. Kubr, 2002; Schein, 1988). However a more critical strand of the literature claims that this is often an illusion created by a cunning and manipulating consultant.

Our understanding of the consultant client relationship is thus central for our understanding not only of the nature of management consulting in general but also for an understanding of the unfolding of a single process and its potential contributions and problems.

The literature's treatment of this relation, especially taking the perspective of the client, is however limited and highly ambiguous. In some instances, the buyer is described as the powerful party, acting like the "customer" with an ability to hire and fire, direct the consultants' actions, and to some extent exploit their need to please their clients. In other places the buyer is depicted as a victim, anguished by the demands of the managerial role and position, struck by feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy, and exploited by the consultants' claimed superior knowledge.

Most of the images are based on consultants' or researchers' interpretations of the consultant-client relationship. Surprisingly seldom, however, the clients themselves are asked in a more systematic way about their understanding of their role as buyer and the consultant-client relationship. Still this may be very important. The buyer's self perception may be viewed as an important determinant of the ways in which consultants are used and managed and ultimately the kind of results produced (although this last issue will only be touched upon briefly).

This is what this paper sets out to do. Based on interviews with managers in two large organizations, managers' views on consultants and how to use these are investigated. While there were a number of common aspects in these perceptions, it was also possible to identify 4 systematically different way of perceiving management consultants and the associated consultant-client relationship.

In the following, we will begin with a review of the literature concerning images of the buyer of management consulting services. After a brief methodological discussion, we will then turn to the empirical results. These identified a number of different conceptions of management consultants. These findings and their implications will be discussed in a final section of this paper.

Images of the client in the literature

The literature on management consulting may crudely be divided into two main streams taking quite different perspectives (see Fincham & Clark, 2002; Kipping & Armbrüster, 1998 for a more detailed categorization of the literature). A first group takes, what might be called a functionalist perspective and is concerned mainly with improving or securing the effectiveness of management consulting. Authored by consultants or consulting academics, this literature provides concrete advice to consultants (see e.g. Block, 2000; Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 2002).

The second group of literature – the critical consulting literature – has emerged more recently as a reaction to shortcomings in the functionalist literature. While the functionalist literature takes the value of management consulting to its clients for granted, the critical literature makes this the main subject for its research. The main concern of much critical research has thus been the consultants’ strategies for convincing their clients of both their superior knowledge and the value they may offer.

These two groups of literature approach the consultant-client relationship from different perspectives, and give partly different images of the buyer of consulting services. Three main images of the client may be identified in the literature – the customer, the client and the victim. The different images of the client imply different power distributions between the buyer of consulting services and the consultant. These three images are often blended not only in the different streams of the literature – they can be found both in the functionalist and the critical literature, but also in single texts. In e.g. the functionalist literature it is not unusual to find references to both the “customer” and the “client” images in a single text.

Different images of the buyer of consulting services are linked to different models of consultation. Schein (1988) for example distinguishes between three – purchase of expertise, doctor-patient and process consultation. In the first model, the buyer has the characteristics of a “customer” whereas the other two models of consultation represent the buyer in terms of a “client”. In the following we will review three dominant images of the buyer of consulting services in the literature (see Table 1 for a summary).

	The customer	The client	The victim
The buyer	Purchaser of a well defined service	Insecure, in need of “help” Unable to define the “problem”	Anguished. Pressed by impossible demands of the managerial role
The consultant	Provider of delimited expert advice or resources	“Helper” in possession of superior expertise and skills	Skilled manipulator creating his/her own market
Consultant-client relationship	Arms-length, temporary	Close, trustful	Close, manipulated by the consultant
Party in control of relationship	Buyer – can hire and fire; Critically evaluates	Consultant – due to superior content and process knowledge	Consultant

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Table 1 Different images of the consultant buyer in the literature

The customer

A first image of the buyer of consulting services is that of the “customer”. Although the term customer is not directly used by the literature – the dominating term in this is “client” which will be discussed in the next section – the buyer described does not differ in any significant way from the buyer of traditional goods or services. The buyer of consulting services is described as involved in a business transaction in which a well defined service is provided in exchange for money.

This image, dominant in the functionalist literature, pictures the consultant-client relationship as a contractual, arms-length and temporary one involving the delivery of a knowledge-based service. The need for this service originates in the buyer’s felt knowledge or resource deficiencies. A central characteristic of the purchased service is its temporary character implying a clear definition of its content, terms and duration. The Code of Conduct of the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI) for example, specifies that a member “[w]ill make sure that before accepting any engagement, a mutual understanding of the objectives, scope, work plan and fee arrangement has been established” (www.icmci.com), (see also Greiner et al., 1983; Kubr, 2002) . To clearly defined and delimit the scope and expected results of a consulting assignment is also a recurring advice in the literature on how to use management consultants (see e.g. Kubr, 1993; see e.g. McGonagle & Vella, 2001).

This thus gives the image of rational and competent buyers of management consulting services, who are well aware of what results they expect (Edvardsson, 1990; Kubr, 2002). They are immune or even allergic to consultants’ use of jargon, overselling and unjustified high fees (Sartain, 1998). The consultant is viewed solely as an advisor, leaving responsibility for a critical examination and the use of the advice with the client (Kubr, 1996; McGonagle et al., 2001). The customer is pictured as in control with the ability to hire and fire the consultant, something which given the consultants’ dependence on repeat business, places the consultant in a dependent position in relation to the client (e.g. Maister, 1993). The buyer organization’s dominant position is further enforced by the possibilities of its members to obstruct the consultant’s work by refusing support and cooperation based on deviant political agendas, general suspicions against management consultants or fear of dependence (Greiner et al., 1983; Kubr, 2002; Schein, 2002) (Greiner and Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 1996; Schein, 2002). A trustful cooperation is consequently presented as an important success factor of the consultant-client relationship. This requires the consultant to understand and cater for the client’s needs and desires of a professional, psychological and social kind (Bergholz, 1999).

The client

In most of the literature, the user of consulting services is called the “client”. This concept implies some dependence of the buyer of consulting services on the consultant. A “client” is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as “[o]ne who is under the protection or patronage of another, a dependant” and ultimately origins from the Latin, *cluere*, which means “to listen, obey” (Microsoft Encarta).

The more vulnerable, dependent “client” is in need of help in a situation where he/she has problems handling his/her job. He needs the support of a consultant to handle a difficult situation or unexpected challenge. This implies putting their faith into the hands of a third

party with the ability to give advice as to how they may solve their problems. The “client” buyer of consulting services is in a more difficult position than the “customer” buyer, as his/her need of consultants is potentially non-legitimate and implies admitting failure and becoming uncomfortably dependent. Greiner & Metzger (1983) for example state:

“For a prospective client to admit that a consultant is needed is a difficult decision. Many executives view this decision as a sign of self-defeat – that they themselves were unable to solve the problem. It is not easy for a vice president to go to his or her president with a request for outside assistance.” (Greiner et al., 1983, p 41)

Similarly, Schein (1999) states:

“Many cultures emphasize self-reliance and put a value on solving one’s own problems. For a person to seek help and make herself temporarily dependent on another person is a de facto confession of weakness or failure, particularly in Western, competitive, individualistic societies” (Schein, 1999, p.41)

The vulnerable position of the “client” is further enforced by the assumption in much of the functionalist consulting literature that the client does not know his problem and thus needs the help of a consultant in finding it before even getting to a solution. The “client” buyer is thus seen to have large knowledge deficiencies in relation to the consultant, which makes it hard for him/her to take control of the consulting process. Control is in the hands of the consultant with his/her superior knowledge and understanding of the psychodynamics of the helping relationship (Schein, 1999). McGonagle & Vella (2001) begin their book on “How to use consultants in your company” by the assertion:

“Today we are in what is being called a “golden age of consulting.” And while there are two sides to every consulting relationship it seems that the consultant side of the equation has most, if not all, of the tools needed to create and control that relationship.” (p. 1)

The consulting “client” is thus a much more vulnerable buyer than the consulting “customer” putting large faith into management consultants and their expertise. An underlying assumption of the “client” image is that the client has large knowledge deficiencies compared to the consultant and that he will therefore temporarily put him/herself into a dependent position in relation to the consultant, a dependent position that might be perceived as uncomfortable by the client and illegitimate by his environment.

Although the image of the “client” differs significantly from that of the “customer” it often appears intertwined with the former in the functionalist consulting literature.

The victim

The image of the consulting buyer as a “victim” elaborates on the theme of the dependent “client” and is mainly to be found in the critical consulting literature. Authors within this stream question the consultant’s functional knowledge and expertise as the basis for the consulting service. This thus opens up for alternative explanations of why managers use consultants, if it is not for their possession of any formal knowledge or expertise. Given the difficulty of formally evaluating many kinds of consulting services, the question in focus for the critical literature becomes the consultants’ rhetoric and impression management strategies for persuading their clients of their value (Alvesson, 1993; Clark & Salaman, 1996).

This shift of perspective changes the image of the client from that of the informed customer or helpless client to that of the naïve victim of the consultant’s rhetorical and impression management skills by which the client is given the impression of receiving a valuable service (Block, 2000; Bloomfield & Best, 1992; Clark et al., 1996). The client’s assumed uncritical acceptance of the consultant’s services is to a large extent treated as based on the socio-psychological needs emerging from the managerial position. From a critical perspective, the

manager's job is seen as a complex and partly impossible one. Huczynski (1993) describes the position of the manager as follows:

First, the nature of organizational life places responsibility on managers to *perform* and *achieve* in a context where often they neither understand how their actions produce results, nor are able to influence the most volatile element in the organization – other people. Second, partly as a result of this uncertainty, their assessment of themselves is also under downward pressure. (Huczynski, 1993:171).

Managers thus have two parallel challenges in their professional lives – one is about controlling their organization and continuously contributing to its “performance”, the second is about managing their own identity as managers (see also Watson, 1994). In this situation, where both managers' contribution to their organization and their identity are under threat, offers of control, organizational improvement and a positive managerial identity are argued to be sought for and gratefully and uncritically accepted. Management consultants and their services here play a central role in creating the organization in a way making this possible to control, change and ‘improve’ and in creating and reinforcing a desirable managerial identity (Clark et al., 1996).

While supporting managers in handling their anxieties consultants also reinforce these as has been argued by e.g. Sturdy (1997) and Kieser, (1998; 2002), thus creating their own market. By continuously introducing new management concepts and ideas such as Business Process Reengineering (BPR) in the early 90's and e-commerce, e-procurement, e-business, etc. in the late 90's they fuel managerial uncertainty and the use of management consultants to interpret and cope with these trends (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 2002). Furthermore, the slimming of organizations connected with several of the recent consultant-driven management concepts (e.g. BPR) has reduced organizational slack, which further fuels an increased need for management consultants (Kieser, 1998).

The “victim” buyer of consulting services is thus a naïve buyer in the hands of the consultant. Caught in the pressures of the managerial role (which are partly reinforced by the consultants) they search for the help in relieving these pressures by hiring management consultants that construct the organization and its problems (Czarniawska, 1988) in a way that makes the problem possible to solve and renders the consultant a natural solver of the problem (Bloomfield et al., 1992; Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1994). Simultaneously with constructing the client organization, consultants also reproduce an image of management as powerful, important and in control (Clark et al., 1996).

Methodology

This study is based on ten interviews with senior managers in two companies, Alpha and Beta, which are described briefly below. These interviews were selected from the 50 interviews we have made with employees in different positions in Alpha and Beta, in order to get an overall understanding for how consultants are used in the two companies. When selecting which interviews to analyse in this study, the aim was that they should be equally many from Alpha and Beta, and that the interview persons should have similar and relatively high positions. As a result, five interviews with managers in charge of one of their company's business units were selected from each company.

All the interviews have been semi-structured and lasted for 60-90 minutes. They were tape recorded and transcribed, and it is these transcripts that form the basis for our analysis. During the interviews, the interview persons were asked to describe how they worked with management consultants, for what kind of projects or roles they used them, what they

believed the consultants could contribute with and not, which problems, risk or challenges they saw with using consultants, how they viewed their own role as buyers, and what the “ideal” use of consultants would look like.

Alpha and Beta – two studied companies

Alpha is a Swedish public service oriented company in the logistics industry, with 40 000 employees and a turnover of 2500 MEUR. During the last decade, Alpha has gone through major changes since both its market and the demand for its core business has changed dramatically, due to external factors such as deregulation, increased competition and the technological development. As a way of meeting these new demands, Alpha has been using management consulting extensively, hoping that they would help them find new businesses, markets and ways of working. In Alpha, there have been no rules, structures or guidelines for how to buy or use management consultants, even though some attempts have been made from the purchase department to formalize the process. Instead, the managers have been free to choose both when and which consultants they want to work with, something that has led to a lack of overall control over the costs and uses of consultants in the organization.

Beta is a Swedish production oriented company in the manufacturing industry, with a turnover of 19 000 MEUR and 70 000 employees globally, whereof 25 000 in Sweden. A couple of years ago, Beta merged with two larger competitors, and used consultants heavily during the pre-merger and the integration phases. Apart from this, the company and its market are relatively stabile, even though there is a strong need for constant development and new products, due to the intense competition in Beta’s market. At the time for the interviews, there were, just as in Alpha, no rules or formal processes for how to buy or use management consultants in Beta, and the managers were free to choose their consultants themselves. After the interviews with the managers from Beta were made, however, the purchase department succeeded in establishing some guidelines and formal agreements with consultancies, limiting the freedom of the managers but increasing the overall control over the costs and use of consultants in the organization.

A short introduction to phenomenography

In our analysis of the interviews, we have used a phenomenographically inspired method to identify the interview persons’ different conceptions about consultants and how to use them. This method is interpretative and explorative to its character, and was developed by the so called INOM-group in Sweden during the 1970’s as a means of studying the qualitatively different conceptions in a group about a certain phenomenon, their content and distribution in the group (Marton 1981; Uljens 1989; Hasselgren & Beach 1996). Phenomenographic studies often deal with questions regarding learning, competence and knowledge, using the phenomenologically influenced idea that an individual’s understanding or conception of a certain phenomenon (for example, what constitutes a competent buyer) affects how s/he acts towards it (Sandberg & Targama, 1998). The relation between conceptions and competence has been explored by Sandberg, showing that motor optimizers with one type of conception of their work were perceived as more competent and skilled by both themselves and their colleagues (Sandberg, 2002). This is highly relevant for our study, since the use of management consultants can be viewed as the result of the buyer’s conceptions of him/herself as a manager and buyer, of the organization, and how consultants could contribute in different ways.

In the analysis, we started out by reading the transcripts of the interviews thoroughly and carefully several times to find out what the interview persons said about consultants, how to use and manage them and their own role as buyers. The results from this was then analysed

and interpreted in order to identify the interview person's underlying conceptions of his/her organization, his/her own role in it, of consultants and in what way, if any, s/he thought the consultants could complement or contribute to it. These conceptions were compared with each other, and put into different piles depending on how they resembled or differed from each other. This comparison was repeated until we were sure that no other or better distribution of the conceptions could be made or no more piles being put together. Having come so far in the analysis, we had identified what in phenomenography is called 'description categories'. The categories and their content are described below as the disappointed buyer, the trustful buyer, the strong buyer and the instrumental buyer.

Conceptions of the client - consultant relationship

Before turning to the description of the different categories of conceptions, we will have a closer look on how they are distributed over the studied managers, called interview persons, and their companies respectively. As shown in table 2 below, the majority of the interview persons expressed conceptions of the strong or instrumental buyer, and the conceptions also seemed to be rather specific for each company, as only the strong buyer was found in both of them. Possible explanations and implications of this distribution will be discussed in more depth in the "discussion" section of the paper.

Buyer	Interview Person	Company
The Disappointed Buyer	A	Alpha
The Trustful Buyer	B	Alpha
	C	Alpha
The Strong Buyer	D	Alpha
	E	Alpha
	F	Beta
	G	Beta
The Instrumental Buyer	H	Beta
	J	Beta
	K	Beta

Table 2 Interview persons and their distribution over the four conceptions

The disappointed buyer

What consultants should be used for

The disappointed buyer used to use consultants for what he perceived as important projects, as evaluating new markets and businesses, identifying new strategies or the implementation of new methods or ways of working. S/he then let them control the projects, trusting them to deliver high quality results and work efficiently, thereby relieving him/her and his/her employees from parts of their responsibilities and work load. When s/he realized that the consultants could not meet his/her high expectations and that s/he could not trust them to keep their promises, s/he got very disappointed and lost his/her confidence in them totally.

We have used consultants. A total mess. They didn't accomplish anything! Nothing! They didn't understand the problem. So my trust in them has faded with time, it sure has. (...) But the project was a total catastrophe. We had to fire the project manager (interview person A).

As a result of this, s/he stopped using consultants more or less completely, apart from a few specialists in his/her field and a personal sounding board, with whom s/he can discuss his/her ideas, problems and leadership style. S/he also uses a few carefully selected consultants to help him/her summarize and simplify complex questions, thereby making it easier for him/her to understand and decide how to handle them. This is something that s/he finds very helpful in his/her work, and s/he criticizes the consultants from large consultancies for going too much into details and delivering too extensive reports, instead of more comprehensible PowerPoint presentations:

And that material has been useful to us. And it was not a "brick" either. Only 40 slides, no heavy text or anything. (...) It should be simple and clear (interview person A).

The disappointed buyer's expectations of the consultants

Before, the disappointed buyer believed that the consultants knew more than him/her, due to their experience, high education and good reputation. This made him/her feel inferior to them and stopped him/her from questioning their different suggestions, as s/he believed that their ideas per definition were better than his/her. S/he also expected the consultants to bring new knowledge and ways of thinking, and that s/he and his/her organization would learn much from working with them. When it turned out that s/he actually knew more than the consultants, and that the consultants could bring neither knowledge nor efficiency to the projects, s/he became disappointed. At the same time, however, s/he felt proud as s/he realized that his/her knowledge and experience were not inferior but rather superior to the consultants', and his/her self esteem improved significantly when s/he was teaching the consultants about his/her business instead of being taught by them.

We have worked with X [international strategy consultancy] now and we have seen that they don't know everything and that increases your self-esteem. (...) ...we know much more than they do about how our market changes. So for me, it gave me a stronger self-esteem (interview person A).

This series of development has led his/her expectations on the consultants to change from being very positive, believing that the consultants would be able to help him/her in a difficult and complex situation, using their vast experience and competencies while working for the best of his/her organization, to become more sceptical towards them, mistrusting their loyalty and questioning what, if anything, they could contribute with. His/her negative attitude towards them also makes him/her suspect that they are trying to avoid taking responsibility for their work and the results, and to get more information about the organization than they would need for their analyses.

And they made us do the job they should have done. (...) We got much data that we weren't sure we really needed. So they got an enormous amount of information themselves. It gave me a feeling that they were doing it only to increase their own knowledge. I got that feeling. And it bothered me (interview person A).

How should consultants be managed?

The disappointed buyer used to give the consultants a large amount of freedom to perform their tasks since s/he trusted them and took it for granted that they would act in a professional way, being loyal and providing the projects with efficiency and competencies. S/he noticed, though, that giving the consultants too much freedom only led them to disrespect him/her as a buyer, missing deadlines, trying to escape their responsibilities and make the employees do their job for them. This made him/her realize that s/he needed to be very clear on what s/he wanted the consultants to do in the project, specify their tasks and control them if the projects should succeed. S/he also realized the importance of making the consultants adjust their language to the organization, as many employees perceived it as being too academic and theoretic and thereby difficult to understand, something that led to misunderstandings and delays in the project.

There, we were unfortunately controlled by them and that was totally wrong and taught me how one shouldn't do. [What was it that one shouldn't do?] Well, he built...we didn't delimit his assignment. First of all, he was given too big a role in the project, and then the scope of the project was far too wide so it took much longer time. And he earned enormous amounts of money (interview person A).

Even though the disappointed buyer partly questions his/her own and the organization's competence as buyer of consultancy services, s/he puts the blame on the consultants for the failed projects in the past, since s/he believes that they have acted in an unprofessional way. S/he also draws the conclusion that the best way to avoid similar failures in the future is to stop using consultants for anything but clearly specified projects needing structure or models.

The trustful buyer

What consultants should be used for

The trustful buyer uses consultants often and finds their services very useful. S/he believes that consultants can be of great use in new and complex situations that the organization does not know how to handle, and which are too important to risk a failure. Examples of these kinds of situations are entering new markets, defining new strategies or visions, evaluating different business cases and formulating how to work in order to reach the organization's goals. For him/her, it is natural and appropriate to use consultants in major change processes, as described in the quotations below:

When one's making a change in the organization it is almost like an instinctive reaction. - Well, then we need to bring in a consultant to have a look at it and provide us with a solution. (...) We have to make up our mind on how we want to manage the company in the future. Once we have done that, it may be appropriate to bring in some other people and work together with them on the different topics (interview person B).

One of the most important contributions from the consultants in these kinds of situations is their ability to see clearly what needs to be done, how the organization should prioritize and in what it should invest time and resources. The trustful buyer also thinks that the consultants have a better understanding than the employees for how the organization's different actions will be perceived by its environment, and what effects this will have on its trade mark and reputation.

Another contribution from the consultants is their ability to give a neutral and insightful second opinion on the organization's different ideas, investigations or analyses. By letting

them check and recount the analyses made by the organization, the buyer feels more secure and convinced that they are correct. It also increases the credibility of the results internally in the organizations, as the consultants are perceived as highly competent and apolitical, thereby guaranteeing the quality and neutrality of the results. One aspect of this is that the trustful buyer believes that the consultants can get access to information in the organization much easier than the employees, since they stand over all the internal political games and are more socially skilled.

So the strength this time is that we have recounted all the analyses made internally by the employees in Alpha and put together a picture of Alpha's financial situation and of where we think the demand in the future will lie. So I would say that we have never before had a more unsentimental picture of Alpha's situation than we have today. For no matter how one does it, making the analysis internally always create emotions, and in the end a business manager is responsible for his business, and so on. And now all our analyses have been checked by McKinsey and the emotional biases in them have been removed (interview person C).

The trustful buyer's expectations of the consultants

When buying consultants, the trustful buyer expects them to be competent and experienced, and to bring efficiency, structure and project management skills to the project. S/he also trusts their ability to work independently and to identify early on in the project which problems may arise and how they should be handled. To him/her, it is less important if the consultants have an extensive knowledge about his/her industry or not, since s/he believes that they will be able to understand his/her problems anyway, due to their vast experience. An underlying assumption for these expectations is that s/he believes the consultants to be more competent and better equipped than the organization for handling complex and demanding situations, as well as to see clearly how to prioritize between different actions or projects. S/he does not doubt their loyalty and is convinced that they work for the best of his/her organization. As a consequence, s/he does not regard the use of consultants as something problematic or risky; rather, s/he trusts them and believes that they can contribute to his/her organization in several ways, decreasing uncertainty being one of them.

How should consultants be managed?

As an effect of the trustful buyer's confidence and trust in the consultants, s/he does not have a need for exerting control or power over them. Instead, s/he views their relation as a well-functioning cooperation, where the consultants use their experiences and competencies to help him/her understand how to solve difficult problems and identify strategies for reaching the organization's goals. In line with this way of thinking, learning becomes a central aspect when using consultants. To the trustful buyer, it is very important that the employees learn from the consultants' ways of working and reasoning, which s/he believes is better than the organization's, so that they will not have to use consultants again, next time the same problem arises. In order to achieve this transfer of knowledge and experiences, s/he lets the employees in the project work closely together with the consultants, often in pairs consisting of one consultant and one employee. This also leads to a better anchoring of the project in the organization.

Because the serious mistake we make sometimes is that we bring in consultants without having enough time or resources to let someone work together with the consultant and learn from him/her. Because that is a goal in itself, that we should learn from the consultant so that we won't have to use them for the same problem again, next time it arises (interview person C).

An effect of the trustful buyer's confidence in the consultants' ability to handle his/her problems is that his/her own responsibility as manager and buyer becomes less clear. To him/her, bringing in consultants when facing a problematic situation means that s/he has taken his/her responsibility as manager, since the consultants are assumed to solve the problems in a better and more efficient way than the employees. By doing so, s/he gives away a part of his/her responsibility for the project and its outcomes to the consultants, relying on their ability to take care of it for him/her.

The strong buyer

What consultants should be used for

The strong buyer believes that consultants should be used only for clearly specified and limited assignments, and that they should not participate in important and complex projects, such as major organizational changes, defining new strategies or visions for the company or working with implementation. Instead, they should be used as extra resources, improving the efficiency in their projects, working merely with analyses, or using their neutral position and external perspectives to question their client's ideas or suggestions. For the strong buyer, it is vital that it is the organization (i.e. the manager) – and not the consultants – that makes the decisions, stands as owner to the projects and takes responsibility for them. Otherwise the risk is big that the results from the projects as well as the project itself will not be accepted in the organization, no matter how correct or needed they are, since it will be perceived as the consultants' – and not the organization's project.

Then they [the consultants] can work in a delimited project with limited information, but, we should make the decisions. They can make recommendations, but we have to make the decisions because we have to live with the consequences afterwards (interview person G).

In his/her work, as well as in his/her business unit, s/he does not use consultants very often, and when he does, it is for making analyses or adding capacity and efficiency to a project. S/he criticizes his/her colleagues for relying too much on consultants and using their services extensively, instead of taking their responsibility as managers and finding internal resources for the projects.

The strong buyer's expectations of the consultants

The strong buyer expects the consultants to work hard in a structured, goal-oriented and efficient way. S/he takes it for granted that they should be well-educated and skilful analysts, but questions their ability to understand how their ideas would fit into his/her organizational setting and how they would need to be adjusted to make the implementation of them successful. These doubts come from the strong buyer's perception that the consultants are not experienced enough, since most of them are young and recently graduated, and that they lack knowledge about how his/her company and its industry work. This is also reflected in their reports, which s/he thinks mainly consist of PowerPoint presentations and lack detail and clarity, making it very difficult to see how the consultants have come up with their conclusions, and to check the quality of their analyses.

...if one has worked as a manager for 20 years and in comes a group of happy guys and girls directly from business school trying to quickly scribble down a few simple solutions to all your problems on a slide, and they are very expensive, then I am sceptic. They never stay long enough to see what really happened, what it meant to do as they suggested and if their conclusions were

correct, but instead disappear as soon as they have put together this fancy, simplified and incorrect conclusion and got paid. – Perhaps we could do without that? (Interview person D)

This perception has led him/her to believe that s/he cannot learn anything from the consultants, since s/he knows more than they do, and is more experienced. To him/her, this is a flaw and one of the reasons why s/he does not want to use consultants for anything else but extra resources or analyses:

In my business, I haven't found anyone so far who I think is better than me or who understands how we need to work in order to have the best development possible. Perhaps it is a bit presumptuous, but I have a long experience and know what works and what doesn't. So I have had difficulties finding someone who has a lot to offer (interview person E).

S/he also expects the consultants to try to sell new projects and more consultants, regardless of his/her needs, and criticizes their way of using senior consultants during the purchase processes, letting them create trust and high expectations and then replacing them with junior consultants as soon as the projects start. This is perceived by the strong buyer as if the consultants are trying to con him/her, and this has led him/her to mistrust them and question their loyalty, something which in its turn has increased his/her need for being in control.

How should consultants be managed?

As described above, the strong buyer is very negative towards consultants and their ways of working, which s/he finds too focused on selling in new projects and more consultants, instead of trying to understand how they could help him/her and his/her organization in the best way. This is handled by him/her through demanding from the consultancies that s/he should have the freedom to choose exactly which consultants s/he wants to work with in his/her project. S/he also feels that s/he needs to be very explicit on what s/he wants them to do in the project and where their assignments end, and does not hesitate to use his/her power as a buyer to get what s/he wants.

And then one has to take Y [international management consultancy] by the ear and say: we need highly competent individuals on this project so don't you try to put junior consultants on it and hope that we will train them for you, because if you don't deliver what we need you are out (interview person G).

Being clear on why s/he wants to use consultants, what s/he wants them to contribute with and what problems may arise through using them is regarded as one of the most important success factors in consulting projects, since the risk for losing control and status as a manager otherwise is great.

One has to be very clear about the fact that when you're using management consultants you disavow your own management capacity and your ability of finding solutions. And one has to be clear on that in one case you might need some extra capacity in order to keep your deadlines (...) In another case you might need new ideas because you feel stuck, you need input, well, some new and fresh thoughts, you need to wake up, and perhaps you have to change your culture and direction, and then one has to be very clear about that. Because using management consultants too extensively, which I think Z [a division in Beta] has done, is totally devastating (interview person F).

S/he also finds it very important to use internal resources in the projects in order to make it more accepted in the organization and to make sure that the results from it are tailor made for the organization and not only one of the consultants' standard solutions. As a consequence, giving the consultants too much freedom and letting them work independently is regarded by him/her as a reason for why so many projects fail. In spite of his/her negative attitude towards consultants, s/he does not put the blame on them for the failures. Instead, s/he believes that it is his/her responsibility as a manager and buyer to make the project a success, and give the

consultants the support and time they need in order to complete their tasks properly. Therefore, a failed project is regarded by him/her as the result of weak management, rather than unprofessional consultants.

...it easily happens that one brings in consultants because one hasn't got enough time. And then there's a big risk that one doesn't have time to work together with the consultant and give him the support he needs to do a good job either (interview person D).

The instrumental buyer

What consultants should be used for

The instrumental buyer regards consultants as a tool that can be used in order to help the organization reach its goals. To him/her, using consultants is not perceived as something problematic or risky. Instead s/he views it as a rather simple process, since s/he has a very clear idea of what s/he wants them to contribute with and how their tasks should be delimited, as well as what the division of roles and power between the consultants and him/her should look like, with him/her in control and the consultants following his/her orders. This division of roles is taken for granted by him/her, as s/he finds it natural that s/he as the buyer and manager sets the frames for the project, and takes the responsibility for its outcomes.

A consequence of his/her clear view on his/her own and the consultants' roles is that s/he is open to use them in different types of projects, from making rather simple analyses to formulating new strategies, since the consultants will only be used for very specified and delimited tasks in them. S/he is also open for using consultants during the implementation phase of a project, since s/he believes that they can improve the transition of knowledge and results from a project to the organization by making sure that the receivers understand how to use them.

For the instrumental buyer, major contributions from the consultants are their ability to question his/her ideas and benchmark his/her organization with other companies in the industry, as well as bringing in new ideas. S/he stresses the risks with being too closed in an organization and reluctant to listening to external ideas, and equals it to the risks of using consultants too much.

I have experienced closed organizations that absolutely don't want to use consultants, because they have an attitude of: 'we know this best, no one knows it better'. And that is as dangerous as using too much consultants (interview person H).

In case of a failed project, s/he puts all the blame on him/herself and none on the consultants since s/he believes that it his/her responsibility as a buyer to make sure that the right consultants are chosen for the project, and that it is completed in a correct way. The underlying assumption for this way of thinking is that even though the consultants might contribute to a project, it is the project – and not the consultants themselves – that contribute to the organization. Taking such a great responsibility also makes him/her stay in control over the project instead of relying on the consultants to complete it for him/her.

I respect many of those working as consultants. I think they are competent but it is up to us to use them in a proper way (interview person H).

The instrumental buyer's expectations of the consultants

The instrumental buyer has a neutral attitude towards the consultants, where s/he evaluates them in terms of how well they fit his/her needs rather than their strengths and weaknesses in general. Even though s/he is well aware that many consultants try to sell in new projects or consultants regardless of what his/her organization needs, and that they present the

organization's knowledge and ideas as their own, s/he does not see this as a problem, since s/he is very careful when selecting which consultants to use and clear on what s/he expects from them in the specific project. When s/he has made his/her choice, s/he expects them to deliver what they have promised, and to work within the frames s/he has set up.

How should consultants be managed?

Two key words for the instrumental buyer are responsibility and clearness, and these are fundamental for his/her ideas about how consultants should be managed. As a buyer and manager s/he feels responsible for making sure that the right resources and tools are selected for a project, so that it can contribute to the organization. This makes him/her very careful when buying consultants and s/he often demands to have the right to choose freely which consultants should participate in the project and how much on their total percentage of time they should spend on it.

As mentioned above, s/he also finds it very important not to give away his/her responsibility for the project to the consultants, to hide behind them or put the blame on them if something goes wrong. For the instrumental buyer, this is one of his/her most important guidelines in his/her job.

...the important thing as I see it is that one doesn't abdicate from responsibility, because as a manager one still has the responsibility no matter what kind of help one uses. And one must never hide behind the consultants and say that they wanted this or that. That is of course a really dangerous thing to do. But it happens relatively, I think it happens relatively often (interview person H).

S/he also stresses the importance of questioning the consultants' ideas and saying no to their suggestions, in case they would not fit the organization's needs at the moment. To him/her, this has more to do with seeing clearly what the organization needs and try to fulfil these needs, than with questioning the quality of the suggestion or the loyalty of the consultants.

For the instrumental buyer, one of the most important success factors when using consultants is to make the project and its results accepted by the organization. To make this happen, the buyer must make sure that the project contributes to the overall strategy in the organization and involve those who will receive its results in it, especially the managers. During major change projects it is also important to identify change agents, that is, to let informal leaders in the organization work with and inform about the changes and act as representatives for them, thereby creating a wider acceptance for them. What it all comes down to is that the buyer and his/her organization feel that they own the projects, and that the consultants have only played a minor role in them.

Discussion

In an effort to better understand the use of management consultants, this paper set out to investigate managers' conceptions of management consultants. Based on a phenomenographic investigation, four different conceptions were identified, representing four different kinds of buyers of consulting services – the disappointed buyer, the trustful buyer, the strong buyer and the instrumental buyer. This thus indicates that managers may conceive of and related to management consultants in rather different ways.

The four identified conceptions map rather well against the images of the consultant buyer in the literature identified above. The *disappointed buyer* shows some similarities with the "victim" as depicted in the literature. S/he has at least initially had large faith in management

consultants and their competence. Central to the conception of the disappointed buyer is the (initial but now deceived) view of management consultants as being able to support and solve the problems of managers in all kinds of situations. Although not explicitly stated, the anguish of the managerial role and the use of consultants to deal with is hinted at as is the expectation that the consultant should be in full control of the assignment and thereby also partly the relationship. Failed projects are blamed on the consultant – not the buyer. This image of a rather weak and naïve buyer giving large responsibilities to management consultants is however claimed to be a historical one. Aware and deceived by the manipulatory skills of management consultants, the disappointed buyer has become very sceptical towards consultants avoiding their use altogether.

The *trustful buyer* resembles the “client” in the literature. The relationship between consultant and buyer is described as a rather close and trustful one, with managers having faith in consultants’ ability to act in their best interest. Consultants are thus left with some freedom to decide what needs to be done, enabling the joint definition of problems so important in the consultants – client relationship as described in the literature. The buyers strong faith in the consultant, however also hints at some potential aspects of the victim role. Turning to consultants to deal with “new and complex situations” in order to “reduce uncertainty” makes them potential victims of consultants manipulation and impression management (Clark, 1995).

The *strong buyer* is a strong representation of the “customer” as depicted in the literature. The focus on clearly defined assignments, strong control of the consultants work, indicating an arms-length distance relation and the repeated mentioning of the buyers control over management consultants are all in line with the literatures depiction of the buyer of consulting services as customer.

Finally, *the instrumental buyer* is somewhat more difficult to relate to the images of the consultant buyer presented in the literature. The instrumental buyer shows similarities both with the “client” in indicating the possibility of close and “interactive” relationships and the customer in its focus on the buyer’s responsibility in defining and following up the role of the consultant. Signifying for the instrumental buyer is, however, his/her rather neutral relation to consultants, where these are seen as a natural and integrated part of the managerial toolbox. The fact that management consultants are outsiders employed in a different organization, thus making their use a market transaction rather than a hierarchical coordination as would be the case if internal resources were used instead is secondary to the instrumental buyer. This image of the buyer (or rather user) of consulting services is however not clearly represented in the consulting literature. Management consultancies, such as Accenture and KPMG however increasingly reproduce such an image of consultants as an integrated and natural part of the managerial toolbox when presenting their services (Bäcklund & Werr, 2003).

While this study points at the existence of multiple conceptions of management consultants, it also points at the dominance of one of the literature’s images – the “customer”. Four of the 10 managers studied expressed conceptions of the “strong buyer” of consulting services and additional three conceived of themselves as instrumental buyers, which had strong ingredients of the “customer” image in the literature. This dominance of the customer image is noteworthy, as it in large portions is contrary to what the more normatively oriented literature on management consulting suggest to be central prerequisites for value creation in the consultant-client relationship. Keywords such as “understanding”, “collaboration” and “trust” are repeatedly mentioned as a key to an effective consultant-client relationship (Kubr, 2002); (see also Greiner et al., 1983; Schein, 1988; Schein, 1999). These are central ingredients in the “client” image, which through the “trustful” conception of the buyer role was represented by only two managers. Keywords central to the dominating “customer” image are instead

“clear assignments”, “distrust” and “control”. This observation of an increasingly demanding and “distanced” buyer of consulting services has further been pointed out by e.g. Niewiem and Richter (2004). What do these changes in the way in which management consultants are managed and thus the prerequisites of value creation in management consulting? This will be discussed next.

An integrated and important part of managers’ conceptions of their role as buyers of consulting services included their view of the possible contributions of consultants and how they should be managed in order for these contributions to be realized. The disappointed buyer initially had high hopes concerning the contributions of consultants. With their superior knowledge and experience they were expected to take care of the buyer’s managerial challenges in all kinds of situations. There was no need to more closely define the consultants’ role or contributions, as they were assumed to “know better”. Leaving problem solving, problem definition and implementation to the consultants thus made sense – as it does to blame the consultants for any failures.

This way of dealing with consultants, however, did not work out very well, at least not for the manager representing the “disappointed buyer” in this study. As a reaction, this buyer turned away from management consultants all together. Being highly disillusioned through bad experiences, more extensive engagements with management consultants, especially from larger organizations are unthinkable for the disappointed buyer. In the few occasions in which s/he still uses advisors, the quality is controlled through the interpersonal relationship. S/he buys individuals, mainly as a sounding board, who s/he knows he can trust.

The trustful buyer had a more positive conception of management consultants. Their possible contributions were viewed as rather broad, with a focus on their knowledge and experience. Trustful buyers often employed consultants for a “second opinion” or for ideas about how to deal with new and complex challenges. They also had few negative expectations on the consultant-buyer relationship, which distinguished them from especially the disappointed and the strong buyers. In this context, the relation strived for by the buyers was an open and trustful one, focusing on cooperation in both problem definition and problem solving. As the only ones, the trustful buyers acknowledged the possibility of learning and knowledge transfer in their collaboration with the consultants.

The strong buyer, as opposed to the trustful buyer did not view management consultants as a source of superior knowledge or expertise, but rather as a readily available “extra pair of hands”. Consultants were conceived of as hard working, analytically and well structured and worked best in well defined and clearly delimited projects. This implies that the strong buyer assumed him/herself to possess at least as much expertise as the consultants, in order to be able to define and delimit their tasks.

The strong managers’ expectations of consultants were not the highest. If not managed tightly, they were expected to constantly expand their assignments, provide standard solutions rather than solutions adapted to the specific organization, fill the projects with inexperienced junior consultants, etc. The basic mood of these managers in the consultant-client relationship was thus one of suspicion and distrust. In order to ensure positive results, the strong buyer focused on control in managing consultants. Interaction and involvement from the buying organization was emphasized as a way of maintaining control and ensuring the adaptation of the consultants’ work to the own organization. Consultants were to be kept at a distance, clearly delimited from the buyer organization, which also precluded their use in strategic or implementation matters. In accordance with this strive for strong control in the consultant-client relationship, the buyer also assumed responsibility for whatever contribution or non-contribution the consultants delivered.

The instrumental buyer, finally, represents a mix between the trustful buyer and the strong buyer in terms of the perceived contributions of the consultants and the way in which they were to be managed. The instrumental buyer acknowledges a rather broad range of contributions from consultants, including their expertise as well as their hard working resources. The instrumental buyer conceives of consultants as yet another tool in the managerial toolbox that may help the manager achieve the business goals. In opposition to the strong buyer, the instrumental buyers do not see their relation with consultants as especially problematic. As long as the reasons for using consultants and their role in the business context are clear, they are expected to deliver according to expectations. However, as in the case of the strong buyer, consultants are not to be left to work alone, but rather the buying organizations' active participation in the consultants' work is emphasized. While the rationale for such participation among the trustful managers was learning, and among the strong managers control, the main reasons claimed by the instrumental buyers was ownership and acceptance of the consultants' work. Still, the instrumental manager is clear about his/her control and responsibility for the consultant-buyer relationship and its outcomes.

Looking at the managers' views on how to manage consultants, a dominating theme of clearly specified assignments, relations on arms-length distance and control emerges. These were more or less evident in both the strong managers' and the instrumental managers' conceptions. Together they represented 7 of the 10 studied managers (see table 2). This thus indicates a dominating conception of consulting services as a standardized, commoditized service easy to specify and evaluate, something that has been strongly questioned in the consulting literature, where the consulting service is often described as intangible, emerging and interactive (Clark, 1995; Kubr, 2002), and where the clients inability to define the "real" problem is almost axiomatic (Greiner et al., 1983; Schein, 1988). This indicated rather drastic change in the perceived character of the management consulting service and how to handle this is also reflected in a changing view of how management consultants are to be purchased. A move from a more relationship oriented purchase to a more formal and rational purchasing procedure is currently taking place in many large organizations (Lindberg & Furusten, 2005; Werr et al., 2005).

Such conceptions of the management consulting service, however deny management consultants' superior knowledge and expertise and their role in knowledge transfer. This has been a recurrently mentioned function motivating the existence of management consultants in the literature as well as by consultants themselves (Bessant & Rush, 1995; Hargadon, 1998; Poulfelt & Payne, 1994; Stymne, 1996), which has been given renewed actuality in recent years' focus on management consultancies as exemplaries of knowledge management (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Sarvary, 1999; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). The above identified dominating conceptions focusing control, distrust and distance may be argued to create a context for the use of consultants that impedes all kinds of knowledge transfer or joint knowledge creation as this to a large extent takes place in close and trustful interaction between employees of the buying organization and consultants (Werr & Linnarsson, 2002) (see also Wathne, Roos, & von Krogh, 1996).

While a thorough investigation into the reasons behind this seeming neglect of knowledge and learning in management consulting from the buyer's is beyond the scope of this paper, a number of possible explanations may be indicated. Firstly, it may be argued that clients have become more competent, reducing the knowledge lead of consultants. In many large companies managers with a background in consulting are rather common and many of the tools and techniques of management consultants are increasingly available and taught in e.g. business schools. Such a decrease in the knowledge asymmetry between buyer and provider

of consulting services would make it possible to act as customer (rather than client), keeping a rather distant and formal relation to the consultants (see e.g. Niewiem et al., 2004)

Secondly, an alternative explanation may be that the conceptions presented above, and especially the view on how consultant should be managed reflects a central institutional discourse on management and managerial control in contemporary society. Given institutionalized conceptions of the manager as being responsible and in control (Huczynski, 1993), it may be hard for an individual manager to argue for a cooperative relationship in which they may (temporarily) become dependent on consultants (Werr & Styhre, 2003). While such an explanation opens up for a loose-coupling between managers' normative views on how consultants should be managed and the way in which they are actually managed, which may be more relationship- and interaction oriented as indicated by Werr and Linnarsson (2002) managers' normative conceptions of how to deal with management consultants are still important, as they set an overall context for the use of management consultants.

This leads over to a final issue to be discussed, namely the organizational distribution of the different conceptions. Mapping representative of the identified conceptions to their organizations reveals some tendencies indicating that some conceptions may be more usual in some organizations than in others (see Table 2). Whereas the disappointed buyer and the trustful buyer were found in Alpha, the instrumental buyer was found in Beta. The strong buyer seemed to exist in both organizations. This indicates that managers' views on consultants are not entirely personal, but rather emerge in relation to an organizational context, where some context favours the emergence of some conceptions. Understanding managers' use and management of consultants may thus require us to include an organizational level in our analysis. Some efforts in this direction have been made recently (e.g. Fincham, 1999; Werr, 2005), but further research is clearly needed.

Conclusions

As management consultants become an increasingly common part of organizational life, managers' ability to manage consultants has emerged as an important issue. In this paper, we have approached this issue by conducting a phenomenographic analysis exploring managers' conceptions of management consultants, their contributions and their management. This analysis revealed five different conceptions representing different kinds of consultant buyers – the disappointed buyer, the trustful buyer, the strong buyer and the instrumental buyer. With the exception of the instrumental buyer, these conceptions matched with images of the buyer of consulting services as victim (disappointed buyer), client (trustful buyer) and customer (strong buyer) in the literature. The instrumental buyer, reflecting traits of both the “customer” and the “client” however was concluded to possibly represent a partly new view of management consultants not yet represented in the literature.

In spite of the differences between the studied managers' conceptions of management consultants and how to manage them, a dominating theme depicting the consultant-client relationship as a rather distanced one in need of clear specifications and boundaries emerged. This implied a conceptualization of the consulting service as a rather standardized one providing commoditized resources rather than knowledge and expertise. Although important functions for management consulting in the literature, issues of knowledge transfer and learning in consulting thus did not receive much attention among managers. Also, the main ideas for how to manage management consultants were argued to make ad-hoc learning in consulting projects difficult.

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